

# Have You Fallen for This Pervasive ‘Authority’ Myth About Women in the Church?

For many churches, “authority” is the central issue that determines a woman’s role in her congregation. One megachurch, for example, allows female pastors but only male elders. On its website, the church explains that the governing body for their church is the board of elders, and since women cannot exercise governing authority, all elders must be men.

This “authority” myth is pervasive. The popular *Spirit Filled Life Bible*, for example, without a shred of evidence, explains the prohibition toward women in 1 Timothy 2:12 as referring to “the authoritative office of apostolic teacher in the church.” We will confront this myth in the following lesson.

## Understanding New Testament Authority

The New Testament Greek word for “authority” is *exousia*, and it carries the meaning of “authority” and “the right to act.” *Exousia* is found 102 times in the Greek New Testament, plus several times in its verb and cognate forms. Here are several examples of the use of *exousia* in the New Testament.

“They were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having *authority* and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22).

“Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should be sharp, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction” (2 Cor. 13:10).

“Nevertheless, we have not used this *right*, but suffer all things, lest we might hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:12b, author’s emphasis).

“The wife does not have *authority* over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have *authority* over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Cor. 7:4). This is the only passage where Paul uses the word “authority” regarding the marriage relationship, and he gives the same authority to the wife as to the husband.

It must be made clear that nowhere in the New Testament is a woman ever told that she cannot exercise *exousia* (authority).

### **Jesus Shifts the Focus from Authority to Service**

There is obviously a place for *exousia* (authority) in the New Testament. That being said, Jesus made it clear that leadership in His church was to be defined not by *exousia* (authority), but by *diakonos* (servanthood).

Yes, Jesus completely blew apart the “authority myth” when James and John requested the two most prominent seats in the kingdom. This, in turn, provoked an argument among the 12 concerning who would be the greatest in the kingdom. They obviously had visions of authority, status and importance.

The 12 must have been shocked when Jesus told them they were to function as *diakonoι*, a Greek word that referred to a lowly “servant” with no connotations of status, importance or power. After pointing out that their preoccupation with authority and power is how the Gentiles think, Jesus said to them:

“But it shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever among you would be greatest must be servant of all” (Mark 10:43-44).

### **Women Leaders in the First Century Church**

During the first century, when “service” was the chief characteristic of a Christian leader, women functioned freely in leadership as evidenced even by Paul. For example, in Romans 16:1-2, Phoebe is described by Paul as a *diakonos*, the

word Jesus said should characterize His leaders.

In 23 places in the New Testament where *diakonos* was used in reference to men, it was translated as “minister.” Showing translators’ bias, some translations have translated the word as “helper” when it was used here of a woman. That Phoebe was a minister and leader of the church in Cenchrea is confirmed by the well-known theologian, E. Earle Ellis, who said:

*Diakonos is used frequently in the Pauline letters for those who exercise ministries of teaching and preaching. The title is given to Paul and to a number of his associates who are active on a continuing basis as traveling missionaries or as coworkers in local congregations. In terms of modern function, it best corresponds to the modern designation “minister” (Hyatt, Paul, Women and Church, 27).*

Paul also said that Phoebe had been a *prostatis* to many, “and of myself as well” (Rom. 16:2b). The KJV and NKJV translate the word as “helper,” but *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* says that *prostatis* refers to “a woman set over others” and that it describes Phoebe as a “guardian, protector and benefactor.” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says that *prostatis* is a word of “dignity” and indicates the high esteem with which she was regarded.

Paul greets Priscilla and Aquila and the church that is in their house. Priscilla and Aquila are always mentioned together, and here, Paul went against the accepted protocol and mentioned Priscilla first, leading many New Testament scholars to believe that she was the spiritually gifted one and the pastor of the church that met in their home (Rom. 16:3-5).

Paul greets Andronicus and Junia, whom he says, “are noteworthy among the apostles” (Rom. 16:7). *Junia* is a feminine name, and every ancient Greek manuscript has the feminine form. The early church fathers recognized *Junia* as

feminine, as did every early English translation.

1. Based on the overwhelming textual and historical evidence, every early English translation opted for the feminine name, *Junia*. These include Tyndale's New Testament (1526), the Coverdale Bible (1535), the Great Bible (1539), the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishop's Bible (1568) and the King James Version (1611).
2. We only find the male name "Junias" appearing in modern translations beginning with the Revised Version in 1881 and followed by the RSV, the NASB, the TEV, the MSG and the 1984 NIV. Newer translations, such as the NRSV, NLT and NKJV, have returned to the original understanding of the word as *Junia*. Faced with the overwhelming evidence, the translators of the NIV changed the name to *Junia* in their 2011 edition.

In Philippians 4:3b, Paul acknowledges the women whom he says, "labored with me in the gospel." Gerald F. Hawthorne, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, says that Paul, in this passage, uses a metaphor, which means "to fight together side by side with," clearly indicating that Paul sees these women not as peons under him, but as highly esteemed members of his team who have labored at his side in the cause of Christ.

Considering the many examples of female leaders in Scripture, it is no wonder that the noted British New Testament scholar, the late F.F. Bruce, declared, "The mainstream churches of Christendom, as they inch along towards a worthier recognition of the ministry of women, have some way to go yet before they come abreast of Paul" (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 31).

### **The Truth About 1 Timothy 2:11-12**

Many, no doubt, are anxious to call my attention to 1 Timothy 2:12a where Paul said, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man, but to be silent." Yes, Paul said this, but there is a *big* difference in this verse and all the

others concerning authority.

The word “authority” in 1 Timothy 2:12 is *not* translated from *exousia*. It is translated from a strange Greek word, *authentein*, that is found only here in the entire New Testament. This, in and of itself, is a clear indication that Paul is not addressing the normal exercise of authority in the church. If that had been the case, he would have used the word *exousia*, which he and all other New Testament writers use.

*Authentein* is a negative word meaning to control or domineer and at least once was used in the ancient world regarding a murder. Because *authentein* is found only here, in this personal letter to Timothy, Paul’s directive that women are not to teach or to *authentein* a man must be understood as applying to the unique situation Timothy is facing in the city of Ephesus where he is confronting heretical teaching (see 1 Tim. 1:3). Paul would be shocked to see how his words to Timothy have been used to silence all women everywhere.

### **When Women Were Marginalized**

After Paul and the first generation of Christians passed off the scene, the church began to institutionalize, putting more and more emphases on outward forms of order and structure. As part of this institutionalizing process, Christian leaders began to think of ministry no longer in terms of service, but in terms of “office” and “authority” (to read an account of this institutionalizing process in Christian history, see my books, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity* and *Pursuing Power*).

This authoritarian approach to church and ministry reached its crescendo with Constantine and the emergence of a form of Christianity that is predicated on power and authority. It was after the church institutionalized and began to think of leadership in terms of “office” and “authority” that women began to be excluded from leadership roles in the church and

passages such as 1 Timothy 2:11-12 used to justify their exclusion.

The fact that so much of the church still makes “authority” the criterion for excluding women from leadership is an indication that we have not fully recovered from the Constantinian form of church where authority is the central issue.

### **We Must Return to Jesus and the New Testament**

Let us pray and be bold to declare God’s truth to this generation. Pray that our authority-laden church structures will be transformed into centers of service where women as well as men are free to exercise their leadership gifts and callings. This, I believe, will help position us to see another great, worldwide, spiritual awakening where both sons and daughters are free to speak and act as moved by the Spirit.

*This article is derived from a message delivered by **Dr. Eddie Hyatt** at a special event honoring International Women’s Day at the International Christian Women’s Hall of Fame in Grapevine, Texas. This message is available at the God’s Word to Women YouTube channel by clicking [this link](#). The truths of this article may be found in more detail in Dr. Hyatt’s book, Paul, Women and Church, available from Amazon and his website at [. The article originally appeared at .](#)*